

Documenting the Impact of an NCAA Final Four Appearance on a 'Mid-Major' Division I University

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**Session 20: Economics
Presentation (25-minute)**

Friday, June 1, 2007

3:50 PM - 4:25 PM

Intercollegiate athletics have direct and indirect impacts upon the institutions with which they are affiliated (Goff, 2004). Both the athletic unit and the greater university can be affected by media exposure, general financial contributions, and student interest resulting from athletic performances. While the majority of NCAA Division IAA and IAAA basketball teams operate at a loss (Rosner & Shropshire, 2004), the prospective economic and social benefits of advancement in a well-publicized, mega-event such as the NCAA Final Four is of great significance to a mid-major university.

The distribution of revenues generated from the \$6.2 billion contract with CBS for NCAA Basketball Tournament broadcast rights makes economic gain a certainty (Fort, 2003). Yet, beyond the financial payout from tournament wins, many additional impacts might be realized. For example, using the Standardized Advertising Unit approach to calculate exposure value, researchers examining Gonzaga University estimated the value of its 1999 Elite Eight run at \$37.8 million, while also witnessing increases in web hits, enrollments, and donations (Frye, Bozman, & Stotlar, 2003). The University of Vermont also experienced admissions impacts, among others, when advancing to the Sweet Sixteen in 2005. Are these reported impacts consistent with the effects of George Mason University's recent Final Four appearance?

The purpose of this investigation is twofold: (a) to determine, through the analysis of existing data, the economic and social impacts throughout the athletic unit and the university; and (b) to assess stakeholders' perceptions of the immediate, temporary, and enduring impacts of the George Mason University basketball team's Final Four appearance. Therefore, mixed methods were employed in the study.

Quantitative analyses were employed to yield descriptive data on admissions, inquiries, retention, ticket sales, internet hits, personnel, and media exposures were employed. A document review, including archival contributions and university reports, revealed the depth and breadth of the impacts throughout the institution. Estimates of the value of media exposure were determined for both print media and broadcast media using a similar Standardized Advertising Unit, advertising-cost-per-exposure method to calculate the estimates. Factors taken into consideration in estimating the values include location of the exposure (front page v. interior page), depth of coverage (lead story v. brief mention), and breadth of the exposure (local v. national), among others (e.g. graphic images in print media exposures).

In addition to the financial windfall from NCAA revenue distribution, the institution received extensive media exposure, currently estimated between \$50 and \$80 million, as well as vastly increased sales of licensed products. Internet exposure increased 503%, with unique visitors jumping 702%. Initial results also reveal a 48% increase in advanced ticket sales for men's basketball. Additionally, the Admissions Office reports a rise in admissions of 10%, in admissions inquiries of 350%, and in average SAT scores of nearly 10 points. More extensive results will be reported on both the economic and social impacts of the Final Four appearance.

In addition to the quantitative results, semi-structured, qualitative interviews provided insights into both the magnitude and the duration of the impacts upon university stakeholders. The use of a member-checking technique was incorporated to enhance reliability of the interview procedure (McMillan, 2004). Participants were asked to share their perceptions of the major positive and/or negative impacts of the Final Four upon the institution, upon their unit, and particularly upon their position. Their perceptions of the immediate, temporary, and enduring impacts resulting from the Final Four appearance were solicited. Observations were collected regarding perceived impacts on how the responsibilities of individual positions changed. For example, were sport managers' jobs redefined during the event, after the event, permanently, or not at all? In some cases, evidence led to new positions being developed. Participants were also asked to address institutional data management capabilities, strategic planning initiatives, and data-driven decision-making processes, before, during, and after the Final Four run.

Specific emphases of the interviews were placed on the roles and responsibilities of selected administrators and staff, both within and outside of the athletic unit, and on stakeholders in the sport management program as well. Purposive sampling was utilized to engage participants whose offices or departments were directly or indirectly impacted by the surge of attention on the

2007 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2007)

institution during the Final Four in March 2006. Impacted affiliations were determined from media reports, literature review of comparable occurrences, a review of organizational structure, and unofficial observation of specific administrators, athletic staff members, and sport management faculty members during that period of time.

Based upon insights garnered from the qualitative component of this study, a discussion of the potential role sport managers can assume in preparing for, and executing their roles, including strategies to prepare for these impacts, will be offered. In particular, observations regarding the management of data streams in support of functional decision-making, and the timely availability of that data will be addressed.